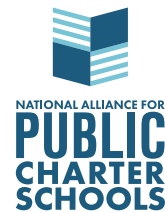


# UNIFIED ENROLLMENT

LESSONS LEARNED FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY

SEPTEMBER 2018



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NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR PUBLIC  
CHARTER SCHOOLS



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## INTRODUCTION

Unified enrollment systems have become increasingly popular among policymakers and parents because they facilitate public school choice, streamline burdensome application processes, and, ideally, increase equity. These systems allow parents who are unhappy with their assigned school to apply to any public school within their district regardless of where they live. When these systems are properly designed and implemented, they can increase parent satisfaction, empower disadvantaged students to more easily opt into better schools, pressure low-performing schools to improve or face closure, allow schools to specialize and differentiate, and provide data on parent preferences and school demand. However, they also have the potential to confuse and frustrate parents, they add an additional layer of administration between schools and families in the public school choice process, and they impede some of the autonomies that charter schools previously employed in setting up their own enrollment processes.

Typically, districts that implement a unified enrollment system already provide public school options that are outside of the traditional model, including alternative schools, magnet schools, and charter schools. Unified enrollment systems have a common website, a common application, and a common deadline for all public school options within the system. Some districts (such as New Orleans) require every parent to participate, while other districts (such as Denver and Camden) provide default school assignments for parents who are already satisfied with their neighborhood school or do not wish to participate in the process. A matching algorithm tries to maximize the potential of each parent to be satisfied with the school choice that they receive. While not all parents will end up with one of their top choices, unified enrollment can potentially create a much simpler and more equitable system of public school choice by eliminating the need for parents to apply to many different charter

schools or navigate the often complicated rules associated with enrolling in a district school outside of their assignment zone.

Unified enrollment systems are dynamic and complex and require special attention when considering support and logistical systems like funding models, facilities planning (including both short-term and long-term planning), local accountability systems, school comparison tools, and transportation planning. Further, these systems require coordination and cooperation across numerous stakeholders. This research brief will provide an overview of how these systems have been designed and implemented in six public school districts—Denver, New Orleans, Newark, Washington, D.C., Camden, and Indianapolis—while also reviewing the available outcome related research. In addition, the conclusion section reviews the pros and cons for cities that are exploring the idea of implementing a unified enrollment system. It is important to learn about the successes and challenges these cities have experienced, as many other districts, such as Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles, are currently exploring unified enrollment systems.

These six unified enrollment systems are relatively new and, thus, the research on their effectiveness is limited. Policymakers have worked to understand their costs and benefits and to assess their popularity among parents—both overall and among different constituency groups—but their benefits could ultimately outweigh their challenges.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank Davis Taske for excellent research assistance and Susan Pendergrass for providing very helpful feedback on earlier versions of this report.



# REVIEW OF CURRENT UNIFIED ENROLLMENT SYSTEMS

Six cities have currently implemented unified enrollment systems. At the time of implementation, Denver and Washington D.C. were the largest districts, with more than 80,000 students, and Camden was the smallest district, with under 15,000 students. All of these districts had at least a 10 percent charter school enrollment share at full implementation. In 2016-17, 208 districts had at least a 10 percent charter school enrollment share and at least 10,000 total public school students. If many large urban districts with a significant charter school enrollment share consider or eventually implement unified enrollment systems, their reach could potentially impact millions of students.

**TABLE 1: UNIFIED ENROLLMENT SYSTEMS**

SCHOOL DISTRICT	SCHOOL YEAR	SCHOOLS			STUDENT ENROLLMENT			
		CHARTER	DISTRICT	TOTAL	CHARTER	DISTRICT	TOTAL	CHARTER (%)
Denver	2011-12	31	133	164	9,945	70,945	80,890	12%
New Orleans	2011-12	68	8	76	33,779	2,799	36,578	92%
Newark	2014-15	17	66	83	12,127	32,098	44,225	27%
D.C.	2014-15	115	120	235	33,992	46,966	80,958	42%
Camden	2016-17	5	22	27	5,361	8,888	14,249	38%
Indianapolis	2016-17*	44	66	110	14,236	28,767	43,003	33%

*Note: New Jersey also has a category of schools called “renaissance schools.” These schools have some of the autonomies provided to charter schools and can be managed by selected and experienced nonprofit organizations, including charter management organizations (CMOs). Renaissance schools have not been classified as charter schools in this table. The data for Indianapolis is from 2016-17, the latest year for which data were available.*

While all of these systems have similarities—for example each matching algorithm includes a sibling preference—they also exhibit significant differences. In Denver, Camden, and Washington D.C., parents can bypass the unified enrollment system if they want their child to attend their assigned neighborhood school. In Denver, all charter schools are authorized by Denver Public Schools, while all New Jersey charter schools are directly authorized by the state department of education. In terms of community outreach, Denver, New Orleans, and Washington D.C., provide applications in a number of different languages, while Camden, Indianapolis, and Newark do not. In addition, the number of schools that parents can rank on their application ranges from five in Denver to 12 in Washington D.C. As other cities explore the idea of implementing a unified enrollment system, it is important to understand how and why these systems were implemented, how they work, how they have performed, and how they differ.





# DENVER, COLORADO

FULL IMPLEMENTATION: 2011-12

DPS' **SchoolChoice** unified enrollment system includes traditional district, innovation, magnet, and charter schools. Families complete one application per student and are allowed to list their top five schools. Every student is guaranteed a seat at their assigned neighborhood school and only those students and families wishing to attend a different school need to apply through SchoolChoice.

31

CHARTER SCHOOLS (OUT OF 164)

9,945

CHARTER STUDENTS (OUT OF 80,890)

12%

CHARTER ENROLLMENT SHARE

Denver and New Orleans were the first two cities in the country to launch unified enrollment systems. Denver already had public school choice prior to 2011-12, but there were over 60 enrollment forms and timelines for district schools alone, and even more for the city's public charter schools (Fox, 2016). There was widespread criticism that the resulting complexity and confusion disproportionately hurt the most disadvantaged students and families, including low-income students, English learners, and students of color. The charge to create a simpler, more equitable system unfolded organically from local community and education leaders. This, along with the relative popularity and acceptance of charter schools among local families and policymakers, led to the creation of the SchoolChoice unified enrollment system. It's important to note that Denver Public Schools (DPS) acts as the authorizer for charter schools located within the city of Denver (rather than a statewide entity) and therefore provides direct oversight of the charter schools in their portfolio (Fox, 2016). This may explain why charter and district leaders agreed to a unified enrollment system earlier than other cities.

The DPS unified enrollment system includes traditional district, innovation, magnet, and charter schools. Families complete one application per student and are allowed to list their top five schools. Every student is guaranteed a seat at their assigned neighborhood school and only those students and families wishing to attend a different school need to apply through SchoolChoice. The application is offered in 11 languages and can be filled out online or dropped off at 150 different locations throughout the city (Prothero, 2015). The SchoolChoice algorithm gives applicants a boost if they already have a sibling enrolled in the school to which they are applying. In 2016-17, nearly 23,000 students—or roughly 25 percent of the more than 91,000 DPS students—applied through the SchoolChoice system to attend a school other than their assigned neighborhood school. SchoolChoice has rather high rates for assigning students to their top-ranked school. In the 2016-17, 80 to 90 percent of students were assigned to their top choice, depending on their grade level.



Denver's unified enrollment system is widely seen as one of the more streamlined systems. DPS has developed a 16-page enrollment guide with school information, a website with a school comparison tool, and citywide expos highlighting different school options. DPS also offers "choice navigators" to help fifth grade students and their families navigate the system as they transition from elementary school to middle school (Prothero, 2015).

However, several local advocacy organizations have been critical of DPS's school performance framework because of concerns about whether or not the district's "definition of a high-quality school is sufficiently rigorous" (A+ Colorado, 2016). Concerns have also been expressed about the way the district calculates its academic gaps indicator, including whether or not it is truly comparable across schools and whether or not it is providing an unfair advantage to more homogenous schools.

Marcus Winters of the Manhattan Institute found that Denver's adoption of a unified enrollment system improved access to charter schools for disadvantaged parents, noting that it "substantially increased the proportion of students enrolling in charter kindergartens who are minority, eligible for free/reduced-priced lunch, or speak English as a second language" (Winters, 2015). Winters also found that the most effective way to increase the enrollment of disadvantaged students in charter schools is to make the application system as simple as possible.

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) found that each year "more than 70 percent of entering kindergarteners and middle school students and more than 60 percent of entering high school students submitted a SchoolChoice application" (CRPE, 2015). While CRPE found differences in application rates across demographic groups, these differences were smaller than they were before the unified enrollment system was implemented.

A report from the University of Colorado reiterated the importance of robust transportation programs that work in parallel with unified enrollment systems (Ely & Teske, 2014). The authors found evidence that Denver's Success Express busing system reduced absences and truancy while providing increased school options for students and families. DPS has since expanded the program, but the routes serve only a portion of the city. Ely later stated that, while the system certainly has its shortcomings, the number of practical options is very limited and "as far as better systems, I don't think there is one. The more you have kids coming from the same neighborhood, going to different schools, the more expensive and complicated the transportation service needs to be. I don't think we really have an answer aside from these piecemeal or ad-hoc solutions" (Robles, 2017). As such, the geographic size of the city and the rather sprawling nature of its semi-urban and suburban areas has been a major constraint for parents hoping to use the unified enrollment system to its full extent.





# NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

FULL IMPLEMENTATION: 2011-12

Through **OneApp**, families rank up to eight schools in order of preference. All families must submit an application upon entering a new school, even when it is their assigned neighborhood school. Unlike many other cities, charter schools in New Orleans frequently serve as neighborhood schools.

68

CHARTER SCHOOLS (OUT OF 76)

33,779

CHARTER STUDENTS (OUT OF 36,578)

92%

CHARTER ENROLLMENT SHARE

Hurricane Katrina undoubtedly changed the education landscape in New Orleans. However, even before the hurricane hit, New Orleans was already preparing to undertake an ambitious set of reforms to fix a public school system that was largely failing (Brown, 2015). When Katrina hit in August 2005, five schools were already being overseen by the Louisiana Recovery School District (RSD), which was the first school district in the county that was specifically created to help turn around failing and underperforming schools (Dreilinger, 2015).

Hurricane Katrina drastically and dramatically changed that plan. Following the hurricane, the Orleans Parish School Board was unable to reopen dozens of schools during the fall of 2005 and the state stepped in almost immediately. The RSD took over 75 percent of the district schools (or all but 13 schools) in 2005-06 and most were converted to charter schools. Under the current plan, all charter schools in the RSD will be handed over to the Orleans Parish School Board by 2018 or 2019 (Dreilinger, 2017). These schools will remain charter schools, but they will be placed under the oversight of the Orleans Parish School District instead of the RSD.

The last two decades of New Orleans education policy have been marked by numerous complexities. For students and families across the city, navigating the plethora of charter applications prior to the unified enrollment system was frustrating and difficult. Advocates for a new unified enrollment system began fighting for their cause in 2007. In 2011-12, after four years of advocacy, EnrollNOLA and OneApp were created to bring increased simplicity, equity, and accountability to the application process.

Through OneApp, families rank up to eight schools in order of preference. All families must submit an application upon entering a new school, even when it is their assigned neighborhood school. Unlike many other cities, charter schools in New Orleans frequently serve as neighborhood schools. New Orleans is unique



in that it provides yellow bus service for nearly all students living more than one mile from their school (Urban Institute, 2017). Almost all elementary and middle schools prioritize neighborhood students for half of their seats (EnrollNOLA, 2017). Like other cities with unified enrollment systems, OneApp has a sibling priority. However, the EnrollNOLA algorithm also uses an additional ‘family link’ preference. The family link consideration tries to ensure two or more students from the same family will be placed in the same school. In 2015-16, 82 percent of family-linked students were given seats in the same school (EnrollNOLA, 2017).

In New Orleans, families can submit applications online or in hard copy at one of three resource centers across the city that are open two days a week. Applications are available in Spanish and Vietnamese and these resource centers also have translators to assist families if needed (Dreilinger, 2015). EnrollNOLA also offers a step-by-step guide that encourages families to visit schools of interest. An evaluation of the system found that 80 percent of parents received one of their top three choices in 2014 (CRPE, 2015).





# NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

FULL IMPLEMENTATION: 2014-15

**Newark Enrolls** allows families to rank up to eight schools. Newark provides transportation to students who live more than two miles away from their school (or 2.5 miles away for high school students). The Newark Enrolls algorithm includes both a sibling priority and a neighborhood priority; however, the sibling priority supersedes the neighborhood priority and the neighborhood priority does not apply to high school students.

17

CHARTER SCHOOLS (OUT OF 83)

12,127

CHARTER STUDENTS (OUT OF 44,225)

27%

CHARTER ENROLLMENT SHARE

Newark's path towards implementing a unified enrollment system was rather unique. For decades, Newark's public schools were a hotbed of corruption and complacency. This resulted in 22 years of state control over the city schools, ending in September 2017 (Strunsky, 2017). The effort to improve the Newark school system was launched in partnership with then Mayor Cory Booker and Governor Chris Christie. The two politicians initially focused their efforts on eliminating corruption, incentivizing positive changes, focusing on results, and bringing in new teachers. In late 2010, Mark Zuckerberg announced that he was donating \$100 million to Newark to help revitalize the city's schools and provide a model for struggling urban school districts across the country. After receiving the grant, which required Booker to raise an additional \$100 million in matching funds, Cami Anderson was brought in as the Newark Public Schools superintendent in 2011. Throughout her four years in the position, she received public criticism for her closure of district schools with little community input (Barnum, 2017). However, Anderson implemented a large restructuring plan called 'One Newark' that pushed for a number of reforms, including a new unified enrollment system called Newark Enrolls, before stepping down in 2015.

In 2016-17, nearly 11,000 students participated in the unified enrollment application process. All families participate in the system when beginning or switching schools, regardless of whether or not they wish to attend their neighborhood school. Newark Enrolls allows families to rank up to eight schools. Newark provides transportation to students who live more than two miles away from their school (or 2.5 miles away for high school students). The Newark Enrolls algorithm includes both a sibling priority and a neighborhood priority; however, the sibling priority supersedes the neighborhood priority and the neighborhood priority does not apply to high school students. In 2015-16, 85 percent of the remaining seats, after accounting for the sibling priority, were prioritized for neighborhood students. In 2016-17, this switched to 100 percent, as newly elected politicians wanted to ensure that all students would be admitted to their assigned neighborhood school if that was their first choice (Newark Enrolls,



2017). However, the original impetus for the 85 percent allocation was to help break down the racial and economic segregation that remains persistent across the city. This exposes a difficult tension for unified enrollment systems: How can and should these systems balance a desire to break down economic and racial segregation while also allowing parents to send their children to their assigned neighborhood school if that is their first choice?

Newark is still undergoing a lot of changes in their public education system and some of these changes have been controversial. Despite the many changes and challenges, Newark Enrolls is allowing for a simpler application process while also helping to reinvigorate the public school system and provide new high-quality options for thousands of students and families. The turnaround of the public school system in Newark is almost without parallel and should serve as a beacon of hope for other urban school districts that are struggling with enrollment losses, bad management, and underperforming schools.

A recent study found that Newark's series of reforms led to significant increases in English scores, while math scores remained unchanged. However, these gains followed initial declines in scores and the researchers did not isolate the effect of implementing a unified enrollment system. Looking forward, additional gains are likely to be driven by the closure of underperforming schools and shifting enrollment towards higher-performing schools. In fact, shifting enrollment patterns accounted for 62 percent of the improvement in English scores over the past five years (Chin, 2017). Despite the often contentious political battles, the unified enrollment system remains extremely popular among parents and families. Based on the most recent family survey, Newark Public Schools found that 96 percent of families described the system as easy or very easy to navigate and 95 percent of families rated their experience with the enrollment process as good or very good.





## DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

FULL IMPLEMENTATION: 2014-15

**My School DC** allows students and families to rank a maximum of 12 schools. The My School DC algorithm assigns students to schools based on these preferences and other factors, including where their siblings attend school and, in some cases, where they live.

**115**

CHARTER SCHOOLS (OUT OF 235)

**33,992**

CHARTER STUDENTS (OUT OF 80,958)

**42%**

CHARTER ENROLLMENT SHARE

Washington D.C.'s previous application system for public education was frustratingly complex. This complexity was driven by two primary factors: 1) nearly half of all public school students in Washington, D.C. attend charter schools and 2) the district has multiple out-of-boundary schools and selective city-wide high schools. Prior to the current unified enrollment system, any school that admitted students through a lottery had its own timeline, application, and lottery systems.

In order to simplify the enrollment process, My School DC was implemented in the fall of 2014. It is the only unified enrollment system in the U.S. that is under the control of the city government and not the school district (SchoolMint, 2017). My School DC is a unified citywide enrollment system for all district schools and over 90 percent of charter schools. However, a dozen charter schools, including Washington Yu Ying and Latin American Montessori Bilingual, chose not to participate in the system. Some of these schools feared that a common application would not sufficiently highlight their specialized programming and unique missions, even though My School DC lists bilingual programs among other factors on the application (Wexler, 2013).

Due to the unique government structure in Washington, D.C., the mayor has had significant power in bringing the district and charter school sectors together to focus on student needs. The unified enrollment system was rolled out through the former Deputy Mayor for Education Abigail Smith's office (Brown, 2013). The system was funded primarily through private donors, including the New Schools Venture Fund, and was budgeted at \$1.4 million in year one (Brown, 2013). Families need to apply through My School DC if they wish to send their child to an out-of-boundary high school, any PK3 or PK4 program, or any participating charter school. My School DC allows students and families to rank a maximum of 12 schools. The My School DC algorithm assigns students to schools based on these preferences and other factors, including where their siblings attend school and, in some cases, where they live. It is important to note that students in D.C. from the ages of 5 to 21 have access to free public transportation during



specified hours through the ‘Kids Ride Free’ program.

Students are placed on a waiting list for all their top schools if they did not get a seat. For example, if a student obtains a seat at their fifth choice, then they are automatically placed on the waiting list for their top four choices (Brown, 2013). My School DC was developed between district and charter school leaders, and the organization sees neutrality between the two sectors as essential to their work of providing knowledge of all school options (Rybka, 2015). The unified enrollment system exists entirely online and ensuring that all families have access to the system remains a major concern. Accordingly, My School DC launched extensive outreach and promotion efforts in the first year to reach families across the city, including multi-lingual advertisements, neighborhood canvassing, and targeted phone calls (Rybka, 2015). The My School DC website offers information in five additional languages (Spanish, Mandarin, French, Vietnamese, and Amharic) to increase accessibility.

The new unified enrollment system allows parents to complete one application, reduces waiting list confusion, and allows school leaders to have more accurate enrollment estimates to help them plan and budget for the following school year. The focus in Washington, D.C., has been on improving student options for even the most marginalized students and My School DC offers information for homeless students and families to ensure that they still have access to the system and a high-quality education. The former Executive Director of My School DC, Sujata Bhat, summed up the intention behind the system “all students are equally entitled to attend a quality school, and unified enrollment levels the playing field” (Rybka, 2015).





# CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY

FULL IMPLEMENTATION: 2016-17

The district's unified enrollment system, **Camden Enrollment**, is similar to those in Washington, D.C. and Denver in that families only need to submit an application if they don't want to attend their assigned neighborhood school. In the application, parents and students can rank up to eight different schools.

5

CHARTER SCHOOLS (OUT OF 27)

5,361

CHARTER STUDENTS (OUT OF 14,249)

38%

CHARTER ENROLLMENT SHARE

After a leadership shift in Camden in 2013, and extensive community feedback, the 'Camden Commitment' was introduced in 2014 (Campbell, 2016). In it, local leaders outlined the commitments they would take to improve the city's schools (this included addressing the unnecessary complexity associated with the enrollment processes). In 2015, district and charter leaders jointly created the current unified enrollment structure that launched in the 2016-17 school year. Prior to the new process, there were 17 different applications for charter schools across the city, all with different deadlines, and parents could not easily opt into a district school that was out of their assignment zone (Campbell, 2016).

The district's unified enrollment system, Camden Enrollment, is similar to those in Washington, D.C. and Denver in that families only need to submit an application if they don't want to attend their assigned neighborhood school. Like Newark, Camden provides transportation to students who live more than two miles away from their school (or 2.5 miles away for high school students). In the application, parents and students can rank up to eight different schools. The algorithm includes a sibling preference that adds additional priority for students applying to a school where they already have a sibling or for two siblings applying to the same school. The Camden algorithm also includes a neighborhood preference for students and families who live in the same neighborhood as the school they are applying to.

Implementation of the new enrollment system included launching a campaign entitled 'Choose Camden' to raise awareness, setting up enrollment hotlines, and creating school fairs and enrollment centers. The hotline received more than 5,000 phone calls in the first year (SchoolMint, 2017). However, fewer than half of parents (46 percent) found out about the system through the official outreach efforts while the majority found out from their child's own school or from family friends or relatives. Further, 29 percent of respondents who did not apply said they were not even aware of the unified enrollment system (Campbell, 2016). These statistics again demonstrate the important and difficult task of raising



awareness about these systems. Camden is currently working to evaluate and improve their outreach efforts.

Shirley Irizarry, a member of the family outreach team, pointed out another benefit of robust and simple unified enrollment systems by highlighting the fact that her own daughter convinced her that “she wanted to pursue another school, she presented the options to me herself, and I’m seeing other students do the same thing” (SchoolMint, 2017). Thus, the accessibility and simplicity of Camden Enrollment is allowing for some students to take ownership of their own education plans and evaluate their own options and needs.



# INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA

FULL IMPLEMENTATION: 2018-19

The **Enroll Indy** platform includes performance data at both the school and subgroup levels. Additionally, the website includes a calendar of all open houses and school tours at participating schools. All students who want to switch schools or are in the final grade at their current school must use the application system.

44

CHARTER SCHOOLS (OUT OF 110)

14,236

CHARTER STUDENTS (OUT OF 43,003)

33%

CHARTER ENROLLMENT SHARE

Indianapolis began accepting applications for their new unified Enrollment System, Enroll Indy, in November 2017 for the 2018-19 school year. The design, creation, and rollout of the new system have all been in the works for several years (Herron, 2017).

In 2015, a former Indianapolis School Board commissioner, Caitlin Hannon, resigned and started Enroll Indy as a new nonprofit organization with the goal of creating a unified enrollment system by 2017-18 (Elliott, 2015). The Mind Trust, another local nonprofit organization, invested \$240,000 dollars to help Hannon launch the organization. However, the quick implementation of the unified enrollment system in Indianapolis has led to criticism regarding the influence of nonprofits on the city's education system.

Hannon eventually gained the support of IPS Superintendent Lewis Ferebee and the Director of Charter Schools, Ahmed Young (Schneider, 2016). Enroll Indy launched a school finder tool in November 2016, before Hannon officially knew if IPS was going to participate in the application system. This tool allows parents to search for schools based on transportation logistics, academic performance, curriculum focus, and athletic programs (Keierleber, 2017). Thus, the willingness of IPS to implement a unified enrollment system was likely a function of, and in reaction to, the rapidly changing local education landscape.

The Enroll Indy platform includes performance data at both the school and subgroup levels. Additionally, the website includes a calendar of all open houses and school tours at participating schools. All students who want to switch schools or are in the final grade at their current school must use the application system. Families can rank up to ten schools and the algorithm includes both a sibling preference and a neighborhood preference. Enroll Indy is available online and on mobile devices. Currently the website is only offered in English. However, families can also apply at Family Resource Centers, any public library, or any one of the dozens of community partners across the city (Enroll Indy, 2017).



## CITIES CONSIDERING OR IMPLEMENTING UNIFIED ENROLLMENT SYSTEMS

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Since the implementation of the first unified enrollment systems in Denver and New Orleans, advocates across the country have been campaigning for similar systems in their own cities. Currently, unified enrollment systems are at the forefront of local education policy discussions in Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles; however, unified enrollment advocates face major challenges and hurdles in all four of these cities.

### **Boston, Massachusetts**

Boston is exploring the idea of implementing a unified enrollment system; however, charter schools have seen significant pushback in Massachusetts in recent years. In fall 2016, a ballot measure to lift the state cap on charter schools was voted down. The campaigns on both sides were heated, with millions of dollars pouring in. Sixty-two percent of people voted to retain the cap on the number of charter schools (Pattison-Gordon, 2017). The city of Boston is also quite divided on the issue, with multiple groups organized against anything remotely related to charter schools.

In 2015, Mayor Martin Walsh launched community meetings to discuss the implementation of a unified enrollment system; however, the meetings came to a halt upon encountering fierce community resistance. Opponents of unified enrollment fear that it will further promote charter schools and eventually lead to district schools closing (Miller, 2017). Nonetheless, advocates for unified enrollment have continued their pursuit. The Boston Compact, founded in 2011, is a collaboration between district, Catholic, and charter schools. The Boston Compact has already launched BostonSchoolsHub, an online platform for parents to compare all schools across the city. In January 2017, Education Chief Rahn Dorsey said that the Boston Compact had completed 90 percent of the work associated with a unified enrollment plan (Pattison-Gordon, 2017). Since the first attempt at unified enrollment in 2015, the 16 charter schools in the city have united around a common application system. In October 2017, a bill cosponsored by Mayor Walsh outlined a proposed unified enrollment system in Boston; however, there has also been significant controversy around this bill.

### **Chicago, Illinois**

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) created a new online enrollment platform called GoCPS that includes a unified enrollment system for high school students. Beginning with the eighth grade class of 2017-18, students who want to attend a public high school other than their assigned neighborhood school can apply to





20 non-selective and six selective enrollment programs anywhere in the district. The new universal enrollment system for high school students includes all district schools and most charter schools. Similar to other unified enrollment systems, GoCPS uses a single best match algorithm that weighs different factors such as student rankings, the number of available seats, and sibling and neighborhood preferences. If a student does not match with any programs, or does not apply to any programs, they are guaranteed a spot at their assigned neighborhood school. In 2017-18, 93 percent of eighth grade students used GoCPS to apply to a public school other than their assigned neighborhood school (Perez, 2018). CPS generally does not provide transportation for high school students that attend a school outside of their assignment zone; however, some students with special needs may still be eligible for transportation assistance.

For parents of younger students (K-8), GoCPS allows them to apply to schools outside of their assigned neighborhood school, but the enrollment system for these students is far more complex and does not utilize a single best match algorithm. In addition, charter schools serving K-8 students have not been included in the GoCPS enrollment platform and parents who want to send their children to a charter school must submit an application to each school individually.

### **Detroit, Michigan**

In Detroit, charter schools already coordinate their application processes through a common application system; however, this system does not yet include district schools. Detroit is among the cities with the highest percentage of charter school students; however, unlike Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, or New Orleans, the city does not have centralized oversight across all its charter schools. In 2010, a nonprofit named Excellent Schools Detroit was founded with the goal of helping to better inform families about their public school options. The organization invested \$700,000 to create a unified enrollment system that incorporated feedback from both charter schools and district leaders (Einhorn, 2017). The total cost of the enrollment system was around one million dollars and was all philanthropically financed. This system launched in spring 2016, but Detroit Public Schools ultimately decided not to take part in the system as they worked on transitioning back to local control after almost seven years of direct state management (Zaniewski, 2016). The Enroll Detroit program is still running, but Excellent Schools Detroit closed in early 2017 and the Detroit Parents Network is now leading the charge to fully implement a unified enrollment system (Clifford, 2017).

## Los Angeles, California

Los Angeles, the nation's second largest school district, might be headed towards a fully functioning unified enrollment system after implementing stage one of a new enrollment platform in fall 2017; however, the current platform cannot be considered a true unified enrollment system due to the systematic exclusion of the city's charter sector. This implementation plan was created and voted upon by the Los Angeles Unified School Board prior to the election of Nick Melvoin and Kelly Gonez, charter school advocates who shifted the board's balance of power. It's important to note that the election was the most expensive school board race in American history, with more than \$14 million dollars pouring in from across the country (Favot, 2017).

As seen through this staggering amount of election funding, Los Angeles has become a battleground in the debate over education reform. Charter school advocates hope that a unified enrollment system could eventually streamline charter timelines and applications across the district. However, a former member of the school board stated that they would "shoot themselves in the foot" if they included charter schools (Szymanski, 2017). School board member Mónica Ratliff has even suggested making charter schools pay to use the system in the future (Szymanski, 2017). The Los Angeles Unified School District is funding the new enrollment system itself, unlike most other cities that received grants from private foundations.

## COMMON APPLICATION SYSTEMS

Common application systems, like the ones in Boston and Detroit, are becoming increasingly popular among charter school leaders in districts across the country. Common application systems are similar to unified enrollment systems, but they do not include traditional district schools; however, they can serve as an important stepping stone towards implementing a full unified enrollment system. In 2012, charter school leaders in New York launched a common application system that now includes 160 charter schools. Philadelphia's common application system currently includes 80 participating charter schools. Missouri is the only state with two districts that currently use a common application system. St. Louis created their system, which includes 17 charter schools, in 2015, while Kansas City launched their system in 2016 with eight charter schools. Oakland also implemented a common application system in 2016 that includes 37 charter schools (SchoolMint, 2017). In addition, 50 charter schools in Houston agreed to use a new common application system for the 2018-19 school year (Fay, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Currently, the path towards developing and implementing a unified enrollment system has varied significantly from city to city; however, these systems do share common goals and structures. In Camden, district and charter leaders came together to respond to parent feedback when implementing their unified enrollment system. In Denver, frustrated families pushed for a unified enrollment system, but their efforts were bolstered by a healthy and popular charter school sector. In Newark and New Orleans, unified enrollment systems were largely the result of rather unique local education landscapes. The implementation of a unified enrollment system in Washington, D.C. was aided by a strong mayor and a consolidated local government structure. Thus, there is no single formula for creating a unified enrollment system.

Some of the opportunities and challenges associated with unified enrollment systems are largely a function of expanded public school choice in general. For example, transportation remains a major challenge for less compact cities with limited public transportation options, like Denver. To the extent that unified enrollment systems facilitate additional public school choice, they are likely to exacerbate these transportation challenges. In addition, public school choice systems and unified enrollment systems provide an opportunity to lessen the economic and racial segregation that is widespread in many urban schools without using blunt and unpopular instruments like busing.

Public school choice provides an opportunity to engage parents from all backgrounds, income levels, and neighborhoods in a fundamentally different way. This increased level of engagement could lead to higher levels of enrollment, increased parent advocacy, and better long-term outcomes. While unified enrollment systems cannot directly impact the availability of different and high-quality public school options in the short-run, they may provide increased opportunities for schools to compete and specialize in the long-run by providing additional data on parent preferences and school demand and by simplifying the public school choice process. While the structure and mechanics of unified enrollment systems ultimately vary from district to district, the pros and cons associated with these systems seem quite similar.

## PROS

- + Unified enrollment systems streamline burdensome application processes, they make it more difficult for some parents to game the application process, and they provide increased transparency about school preferences and demand.
- + They can provide disadvantaged families with increased access to higher quality schools and they can help to further decouple the link between poverty and school quality by giving low-income students and families the opportunity to choose any school in their district, regardless of where they live.
- + They are often implemented in conjunction with strong support systems such as school guides and public information systems that give parents and stakeholders additional information about different school options and relative performance.
- + These systems provide annual data on parent preferences and school demand that can be used to help bolster the case for better schools, especially in low-income neighborhoods. Parent preference data can also help districts (and other local organizations) better allocate resources to students and families.
- + These systems provide an opportunity to bridge two sectors that are often at odds with each other—charter schools and district schools—and unite them in the mission of providing the best possible education for all children in the district.

## CONS

- The assignment algorithms can be complex and difficult for parents to understand. While the mechanics of the application system are quite simple, if parents do not understand how their students are ultimately being assigned to a school, they may question the underlying value and validity of the system.
- Outreach, especially targeted outreach to the most disadvantaged populations, is a major challenge for districts with unified enrollment systems. Some cities, for example Washington, D.C., have an application system that only exists online. As a result, the city still struggles to make the application available to all parents and engage all families in the enrollment process. Such technological and language barriers remain a significant constraint to widespread use in certain disenfranchised and marginalized communities.
- Although parents and stakeholders need high-quality and accessible information about different school options, including any specialized programs that are offered and how schools are performing, they often struggle with incomplete information or an abundance of information that is difficult to synthesize.
- Unified enrollment may lead to better long-term outcomes through increased equity, simplicity, competition, and transparency. But for parents with school-aged children, there is no time like the present. Other more immediate initiatives must be put in place, in parallel with unified enrollment, to increase the number of high-quality options.
- These systems reduce the autonomy that individual charter schools have over their enrollment processes and they add an additional administrative layer between families and schools in the public school choice process.

### **THERE IS A CLEAR NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT HAS AND HAS NOT WORKED.**

The six cities highlighted here provide lessons to those considering these systems. Across the country, the movement towards unified enrollment systems is likely to persist because of their fundamentally simple promise: All families should have a say in which public school their children attend and all students should have access to a high-quality public school. However, building a unified enrollment system that bridges two sectors that are often at odds takes hard work, political skill, and a sufficient amount of goodwill.



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